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ABSTRACT

Outcome-Based Education (OBE) has become one of the most misunderstood efforts in school reform. This brochure sets forth the philosophy of OBE and responds to 25 commonly held concerns. "Outcome-based" means deciding which results the education community wants and then taking the necessary steps during instruction to achieve them. The brochure covers such issues as parent involvement; instruction in the basics; student evaluation and whether OBE prepares students for real-life competition; individualized learning deadlines; whether setting outcomes leads to mediocrity; special-education children; spelling and mathematics errors; OBE effectiveness; reasons for OBE failure (lack of community involvement, time, staff inservice training, resources, understanding of the OBE philosophy); research outcomes; mastery learning; cooperative learning; the cost of OBE; the imposition of certain attitudes and values on children; the violation of families' privacy through recordkeeping; portfolio assessment; the extended school year; and the longevity of OBE. (LMI)

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# Outcome-Based Education: Concerns and Responses

Spence Rogers
Bonnie Dana

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# Outcome-Based Education: Concerns and Responses

by
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## The Philosophy of Outcome-Based Education

"Outcome-based" means deciding the results that the education community wants ahead of time — before teaching — and then taking the necessary steps during instruction to achieve them. Therefore, outcome-based education philosophy recognizes the need to involve the entire education community in determining what students need to learn and then in doing whatever is necessary and reasonable to be certain that each child does learn.

In the face of that simple premise, outcome-based education (OBE) has become one of the most misunderstood efforts in school reform. Often concerns about OBE have arisen because a school district fumbled in its initial attempts at outcome-based education, usually because school leaders did not clearly understand the central tenet of broad community involvement. As a result, many misconceptions have arisen from public concerns about issues that are not part of — nor a result of — OBE. Consequently, OBE educators today must work doubly hard to involve school people, parents, and community members in their efforts to clear the air, build trust, and improve student learning.

OBE cannot be defined as strategies, content, curricula, facilities, staffing, or budget. Rather, it is a philosophical "umbrella" over these operational aspects of education. Each local education community must determine how strategies, content, curricula, facilities, staffing, and budget will be structured to implement the OBE philosophy. If the philosophy of OBE permeates these operations, then they will be

driven by beliefs that all children can learn, that success leads to more success, and that schools are a key element in providing the conditions for student success. Following are some major implications of this philosophy:

- The education community (both the school and the community it serves) must be involved in education decisions.
- Involving the entire education community in major curricular decisions will take time and must be done well in order to build trust.
- Change will require training and resources, and districts must be prepared to operate in old and new ways concurrently until the change is completed.
- A "pendulum swing" should be avoided in favor of a middle-ground position that is likely to be viewed most favorably by all.
- The "old" should not be tossed out until the "new" is in operation and "proven" in the eyes of educators and community members.
- The focus must be on local results, not on what other communities have done or experienced.

These implications stress "education community" more than "school district." In the past, school people made decisions about the course of education and informed the parents and other community members after the fact. School leaders often failed to recognize that most parents have very real and important desires for their children's education. Today's parents are likely to have a greater influence on school programs. In the main, they want their children to: 1) learn the subject matter, 2) become self-directed learners, 3) learn how to work well with others, 4) be effective communicators, 5) develop responsibility, and 6) be able to apply what they learn in new situations.

All of these desires are worthwhile outcomes for any child. However, schools traditionally place the greatest emphasis on number 1, learning the subject matter. Most parents and members of the business

community agree that achieving this outcome alone is no longer sufficient. To excel today, students must learn the other five. And because education in America is a local issue, all stakeholders in a local education community must have a hand in developing the educational outcomes that will result in this learning.

Unfortunately, schools cannot shut down for retooling. Change takes time and growth needs to be continuous, with the school and the community working together with a common purpose. In OBE efforts, communities are simply deciding what is no longer satisfactory, what needs to be done in its place, and holding everyone accountable for making it happen.

Why, then, is OBE under attack? One way to answer this question is to look at an analogy. When a person decides to live a healthier life, he may visit his doctor, read up on healthy living practices, and join a health club. He assesses his current health and plans ways to improve. When he sets his plan in motion, he monitors his progress and adjusts his diet and activities accordingly. By approaching his goal of living healthier carefully and systematically, he is able to reach it.

On the other hand, we all know individuals who have decided to live healthier lives and gone about it without a plan. Fad diets and failed exercise plans, often at considerable cost, do not produce the desired outcome. And so they become disillusioned.

In some communities, the same kind of problem has happened with outcome-based education. The goal of improvement is not at issue. But some educators and noneducators alike have failed to implement a systematic OBE plan, opting instead for "quick fixes" and short-term successes that fail to produce long-term change and growth. Often implemented under the rubric of OBE, such failures have resulted in disillusionment, outright anger, and suspicion of anything labeled "outcome-based education." To counter these reactions, education communities need to reassess their approaches to OBE and to develop systematic, long-term plans to reach commonly held educational goals. And because the OBE philosophy can be implemented in many dif-

ferent ways, each community must develop its own goals and plans, deciding what kinds of outcomes are appropriate for their children.

In the following section, we base our responses to often-heard concerns about OBE on our own sense of outcome-based education. However, that general notion is grounded in the work of William Spady, a leading proponent of outcome-based education. Readers may refer to Spady's most recent book, *Outcome-Based Education: Critical Issues and Answers* (American Association of School Administrators, 1994).

These responses are intended to help educators and noneducators alike to better understand the OBE philosophy and how it may be successfully used to develop school improvement and reform initiatives.

## Concerns and Responses

*1. Parents will not be involved. OBE is being forced on them.*

OBE leaders strongly encourage partnerships between educators and community members. One of the key components of OBE is community and parental involvement in determining what goals, or outcomes, are important. Moreover, such involvement should be present from the outset in determining if OBE is appropriate for their school system, to what extent OBE should be implemented, what the learning outcomes should be, what students should have accomplished in order to graduate, and what parents and schools can do to help their children to achieve the outcomes.

*2. My children need the basics in education as much as I did. Where do they get the basics in OBE?*

Schools that are outcome-based do not abandon basic instruction. In many OBE schools, some subjects are "integrated" so that students study more than one subject at a time. For example, students might work on writing skills in the context of science, such as doing a research report on how evaporation works. In fact, in most OBE schools, students are expected to apply "the basics" in a variety of real-life situations. Decisions about what outcomes to set and how to work toward them are made by educators, parents, and community members working together, which ensures that basic instruction will not be neglected.

*3. Won't grades and report cards disappear with the coming of OBE? What happens when our children run into real-life competition? Besides, won't our children need grades when they get ready to apply for college?*

OBE is not about grading or not grading. Parents and others need to have ways of knowing how well the students are doing. As we envision an OBE school, there will be clearly defined learning expectations for students and accurate, beneficial ways of reporting students' learning. If grades can be made to do this, fine. However, many OBE practitioners question the usefulness of grades. Most teachers, even within a single school, have different requirements for the same course, use different methods of grading, and use different tests; and so grades really may say very little.

Therefore, most OBE advocates believe that a "grading system" should be developed that more accurately reports students' learning. For example, the system might include the use of portfolios containing real evidence of the quality of the students' work. An OBE school might differentiate between what must be done well — even if doing the task well takes a long time — and what needs to be done on time at some level of defined proficiency.

Traditional schools using A, B, C, D, and F grades give children the option to fail or to "get by" with D's. They serve to label and sort, but they do not effectively hold students accountable for learning. Thus many OBE schools opt for a dual system that preserves traditional grades but adds authentic assessments, such as portfolios, and student-led conferences with parents in which students show their parents what they have learned. In many cases (particularly at the elementary level) the parents have said that they no longer need grades; they learn more about their children during student-led conferences that include the use of skill-reporting or portfolio collections of student work based on specific criteria.

To the second part of the question, we respond that, yes, most universities ask for grades and transcripts. As long as they do, we need to provide them. But universities and colleges throughout the United States

are rapidly moving away from expecting solely credits and grades. Many now look at performance evidence, particularly at the top-rated universities and colleges. Also, an increasing number of universities recognize that grades do not reflect what a student knows and can do. Samples of student work and skill reports can help to provide that information.

*4. Don't children have to learn to be successful in competitive situations? Won't OBE inhibit that learning?*

Yes, today's world is becoming more and more competitive in broader and broader areas. No longer do people have to compete merely at the community level; now they compete globally. But W. Edwards Deming, the internationally renowned reformer in industrial restructuring, said that no organization can succeed in today's competitive world when the people within it compete with each other. Individuals and organizations find the greatest success when they make the commitment to continuous improvement, instead of just trying to beat someone else.

The OBE philosophy recognizes that there is a time and place for competition in the school setting. Sometimes, competition impedes learning; sometimes it spurs it. It is important for schools to determine when and where it is appropriate.

*5. I've heard that children in OBE schools don't have to get their work in on time or worry about deadlines. Don't children need to learn how to be responsible by handing in work on time?*

Meaningful deadlines exist in life — and in OBE schools. But there also are times when the quality of the work is more important than meeting a deadline. Shoddy work turned in by a deadline is as undesirable as late work.

Many OBE schools have deadlines and quality requirements similar to traditional schools. But they also recognize that some students take longer to learn or learn in different ways than other students. School is a place to *learn* and to *practice* in preparation for later life.

Real learning may come only after many tries at the same task. It may involve taking more time to put the pieces together in a meaningful way; and it may require a deadline, too. The important thing is: Do the students learn?

Here's another analogy: Children learn to walk at different ages, at different rates, and in different ways. Some children learn unusually early, some unusually late. Some learn with little help, some require lots of coaching. Some almost run before they walk. The point is that because walking is so important, parents don't quit until their children are walking. They don't grade it, and they don't punish their children for not learning to walk "on time."

In OBE schools, students are expected to complete assigned tasks in a quality way. If it takes longer for some to complete a task, they are expected to plan accordingly to meet the deadline. But OBE teachers separate learning goals and specific assignments because there is a difference between time needed for learning and time needed for the completion of a given task. Evaluation usually is based on what the student learns, not on how long it took to learn it. The speed of learning can be reported separately, if that is desired.

*6. Won't setting outcomes lead to mediocrity? My child is a good learner. I don't want her held back while other children catch up.*

The simple answer is no. Traditional schools set fixed standards for all students. Thus faster learners often are bored and slower learners get lost in the rush to get to the next skill. We are all familiar with fast learners who wait through endless review at the beginning of each year and the end of each unit. According to some critics, the typical teacher in a traditional school teaches for the student at the 40th percentile.

In an OBE system, fast learners are not held back by the students who are having difficulty. The emphasis is on all students learning more than ever before. Outcomes are generated for areas of learning that require continuous growth for all students, such as "being an effective communicator."

OBE teachers set flexible standards so that all students will learn. When a learner demonstrates proficiency meeting a standard, the teacher has several options. The student may be given more challenging activities related to what was learned. Such enrichment reinforces the learning. Or the student may go on to another level of learning, a procedure called acceleration. Within these options for enrichment and acceleration are countless activities, experiences, and lessons that help the child grow intellectually. In OBE schools, children do not just sit around waiting for the rest of the class to catch up, as often happens during review times in traditional systems.

Setting outcomes does not promote mediocrity. It does the opposite by structuring learning so that each student continuously improves.

*7. But what about children who need special education? Will they still get help?*

There always will be children who have significant limitations for learning and who will be provided with some form of specialized services in addition to the individualized strategies used in the regular classroom. OBE schools cannot alter the laws, regulations, and policies regarding special education any more than traditional schools can do so. But the special education debate today centers more on the various inclusion laws and philosophies than on OBE philosophy. However, we should emphasize that students who need to have more time, who need a variety of instructional approaches, and who learn best through non-traditional ways usually benefit greatly from OBE. This includes special education students.

*8. Is it true that some students are allowed to make spelling and math errors in OBE classrooms?*

This is a legitimate concern, but it is not an OBE issue. Rather, it is an instructional issue that should be addressed by the teacher or some other school person.

However, in many cases, errors are really developmental stages through which children must pass in order to learn. For example, some teachers use writing instruction techniques that focus first on composition and then, as students gain confidence in expressing their ideas, on correct spelling, grammar, and sentence mechanics. Thus the "error stage" is part of the development process and does not indicate that the teacher is neglecting key learning.

*9. There is no proof that OBE works. I don't want teachers experimenting with my children.*

OBE is not a single curriculum or a single set of instructional strategies. Therefore, it is hard to make a general characterization that OBE either works or does not work. Indeed, many OBE-linked strategies have been proven to be effective. An example is cooperative learning, which often is associated with outcome-based instruction. A good deal of research supports the efficacy of cooperative learning. The same is true for contextualized learning as a general principle.

Because OBE is locally driven, parents and others with a stake in schools must examine the OBE "package" that is implemented in the local education community, supporting and maintaining those instructional practices that work — that prove themselves — and discarding or replacing others.

*10. I've heard that OBE failed in another district. I don't want my children involved in something that doesn't work.*

A number of reform efforts have been mislabeled as outcome-based; and where they have failed, the entire OBE philosophy has received the blame. However, outcome-based education is locally controlled and, therefore, locally malleable. Certainly, individual strategies may fail to lead to the desired results. The responsibility rests with the local education community to discard or modify those failed strategies and to set in place others with better promise.

Failed OBE programs can be grouped into five categories, and their pitfalls can be avoided by others:

- Lack of community involvement. Deep involvement by parents and community members is essential for effective outcome-based education. Community committees are not sufficient involvement for major changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Voter rebellions are proof of the need for school people to be more effective communicators.
- Lack of staff inservice training. Districts that go "shoes, boots, and all" into OBE implementation — without thoroughly training their staff, without allowing hopes and fears to be discussed openly, and without study of the process of change — set themselves up for failure. Teachers and administrators can become overwhelmed by the magnitude of change.
- Lack of time. Excessive zeal to improve learning can lead school people and others to try to rush the change process. Real change requires time to adjust to new ideas and new procedures. Many districts are well-advised to try a pilot, allowing parents the choice to send their children to the school(s) where the pilot is located. Student learning, student joy about learning, parent involvement, budget ramifications, and dozens of other concerns can be studied without having the entire district in a state of flux. Modifications and improvements can be made on a smaller scale, which can help a more broad transition occur with fewer problems.
- Lack of resources. Some districts that have embarked on OBE programs have been overwhelmed by operational problems, such as financial constraints, labor-management strife, ineffective leadership, student problems (gangs, drug abuse, violence), and so on. While the OBE philosophy supports community involvement that can alleviate these problems, outcome-based education itself cannot solve the problems without other direct intervention.
- Lack of full understanding of the OBE philosophy. Districts may try a variety of strategies, programs, or projects that are mistak-

enly characterized as OBE but do not adhere to the OBE philosophy of high-quality school-community communication and involvement. For example, some critics claim that the Chicago schools suspended OBE efforts because OBE did not work. In fact, the schools implemented a Reading for Mastery Learning program, which was piloted with great success. However, they then attempted to implement the program on a broader scale without adequate training and support. And so it failed — and OBE got the blame.

*11. Aren't mastery learning and OBE the same thing?*

Mastery learning and outcome-based education often are confused. Mastery learning is a process whereby a learning task is broken into its component parts. Children need to master each part before going on to the next. Mastery learning is one of many teaching tools that can be used in OBE; but it is not a "requirement" of OBE implementation, nor is it synonymous with outcome-based education.

*12. Is there any real proof that OBE works?*

Yes. Johnson City, New York; the Glendale Union High School District in Arizona; and Township High School District 214 in Arlington Heights, Illinois, are just three examples of school districts that have years of data proving the successes they have had and are having using OBE principles.*

Again, it is important to understand that OBE is not a program, a project, or a process. It is a philosophy. Therefore, each outcome-based education program is implemented to meet the specific needs of a given learning community. When school people and others contact districts that have implemented OBE to find out about their programs, they

*American Association of School Administrators, *Leadership News*, 15 March 1994.

come away with mixed messages. This is not a negative, though it often is interpreted as such. Indeed, the variety of approaches that are consistent with the OBE philosophy is part of the strength of outcome-based education.

*13. I've heard that Robert Slavin's research at Johns Hopkins University proves that OBE doesn't work.*

Slavin's work has been misused. In a letter to Sylvia Whilmer of the Birmingham Public Schools on 6 April 1993, Slavin stated that using his review as "evidence against OBE is totally irresponsible and inappropriate." He added that he wished he could find a way to stop opponents of OBE from using his research out of context. His research simply showed that given equal time periods and opportunities, cooperative learning is more efficient than mastery learning. He did not say or imply anything about the effectiveness of OBE. His research does support cooperative learning, which, when correctly implemented, is more effective than many traditional approaches to instruction.

*14. I don't want my child in cooperative learning all the time in OBE. Some students end up doing all the work while others get a free ride.*

Cooperative learning is a tool that is used in some OBE schools. But OBE and cooperative learning are not synonymous. It is important that children learn to work together if they are to succeed in life after school, and cooperative learning is consistent with the principles of OBE. If used correctly, there is a balance in the students' work in cooperative groups, and the contributions of each group member help the others. Many teachers find cooperative learning to be a useful instructional strategy, but few use this strategy to the exclusion of all others.

*15. I've heard that in Iowa's OBE assessment, there are questions such as, "Do you think people are born homosexual, or do you think*

*they choose to be homosexual?" and "If you could eliminate an entire race, would you? Which one?"*

This is a rumor that has no truth to it. The rumor appears to be based on a survey that was developed and used by students in a journalism class in the Bettendorf school district in Iowa. The survey was initiated and conducted by students without prior approval from the district or the state. District policies protecting freedom of speech permitted the students to print the survey and the results in the school newspaper. Later, the Pennsylvania Parents Committee, in their video, "Who's Controlling Our Children," claimed that the survey was a state/district OBE test. In a 19 January 1993 letter from Robert Howard, Superintendent of the Bettendorf Community School District, the Pennsylvania Parents Committee was requested to "either eliminate the survey reference from the video or accurately include within the video that this survey was conducted by students as a journalism class project and not part of the official policy of the Bettendorf School District." The survey clearly had nothing to do with OBE.

*16. OBE costs a lot of money, doesn't it? We can't afford higher taxes because of it.*

No one wants higher taxes. However, we can afford to re-allocate our available funds if we believe it will benefit children. In order to facilitate OBE, some districts have increased expenditures for staff training and the purchase of a variety of materials to be used in addition to, or in place of, traditional textbooks. Some districts have chosen to employ additional teacher aides to assist in individualizing learning activities. These and other measures are local options. Each district must prioritize what it needs to make OBE work and look at creative ways to make it happen. Most OBE districts find that, once OBE is operational, expenses are about the same as for more traditional schools.

*17. I don't want schools teaching values. Is that what OBE is about?*

OBE is "value-free" unless local educators, parents, and community members decide otherwise. Certainly, schools always have promoted common, civic values, such as honesty, integrity, loyalty to country, respect for others, and respect for property. OBE will not change this characteristic of American schools.

*18. I don't want the schools testing my children on beliefs or knowledge based on subjective criteria.*

The OBE philosophy does not support the use of subjective assessment — that is, assessment based on personal opinions rather than on clearly stated criteria. Traditionally, students often have not been given a clear understanding of what they needed to know or be able to do in order to pass a test, pass a class, or graduate from school. In OBE schools, outcomes are clearly stated so that students know what is expected from them following a series of learning experiences.

*19. But OBE schools can establish outcomes that force students to adopt certain attitudes, can't they?*

If the local educators, parents, and other community members who develop the OBE program adopt attitudinal outcomes, then, yes, conceivably they can put students in the position of being forced to adopt those attitudes. However, attitudinal outcomes are inconsistent with most OBE practitioners' own values. The outcomes in OBE should focus on high-quality performance to achieve clear, objective learning goals.

*20. OBE schools are sending computerized test and family information to the government, which is keeping files on our children.*

Many school districts, including OBE districts, use technology to improve efficiency and to take advantage of space-saving and time-

saving opportunities afforded by computerization. The laws that govern confidentiality still apply, whether records are maintained in file folders or on computer disks and regardless of whether schools are OBE or traditional. Concern about information requested for government use, through legislation, is a government issue, not an OBE issue.

*21. What are portfolios? What do they have to do with OBE?*

Portfolios are meaningful collections of students' work. Samples of student work, evaluations, and commentaries are compiled systematically to provide an authentic (life-like) assessment of what a student has demonstrated. Portfolios often contain: essays, short stories, poetry, reports, problem statements and solutions, quizzes and tests, discussion summaries, artistic media, reading lists and reviews, self-assessment checklists, peer reviews, teacher checklists and rubrics, parent commentaries on homework activities, and, possibly, taped speeches and presentations.

By reviewing the contents of a portfolio, parents, teachers, and the student can see the student's growth. Students can judge what is good about their work and set goals to make it better.

Portfolios are nothing new. Artists, photographers, and writers always have collected samples of their work. Today, many universities and employers are accepting portfolios as a way to determine what a student knows and can do. Portfolio assessment can be used in both traditional and OBE schools. It lends itself well to OBE because it helps show continuous growth in learning, helps students evaluate the quality of their work, and offers a demonstration of knowledge.

*22. I've heard that an OBE maxim is, "Less is more." I don't want less for my child.*

No one does. The notion underlying this phrase (which is not unique to OBE) is that less repetitive teaching — going over the same mate-



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rial, often under the guise of preview or review — will make room in the school day for more real learning.

Some people believe that OBE "waters down" the curriculum because instruction is focused on what is important for students to know and do. That is not true. Traditional education has supported the teaching of masses of information, often regardless of its relevance to life. Schools and communities now need to decide what is really important. In the course of this process, some portions of the traditional curriculum that have been taught for decades may be culled. There may be less of certain types of instruction that is no longer necessary.

*23. Will OBE result in a longer school year?*

School-day and school-year lengths were being debated long before OBE became a focus of attention. Some schools and communities that have adopted OBE are considering altering the school day or the school year in order to allow more time for enrichment and reteaching activities. But such considerations are a local matter.

*24. The term "OBE" carries a lot of baggage right now. If we want to follow the OBE philosophy, wouldn't it be easier to call it something else?*

That is a decision the school and community will have to make. Personally, we feel that it would be deceitful to adhere to OBE and not simply call it OBE. If you believe that the philosophy of outcome-based education is good for children and that it is right for your education community, why would you want to hide what you are doing? We have found that communities that "call the rose by another name" often experience the same controversies. And, when people believe you are hiding behind a euphemism, your problems likely will multiply.

*25. OBE is a fad.*

We do not believe it is. Unlike many other education movements, outcome-based education was not conceived solely by educators or

solely by parents or solely by a special interest group. It was — and should always be — driven by a community's desire for their schools' curricula, instruction, and assessment to be deliberately based on what the community wants the students to have learned by graduation. This may result in a curriculum designed to do a more effective job of causing students to learn a very traditional curriculum. Or it may result in a curriculum designed to teach students the knowledge and skills they will need to meet the demands of our ever-changing society.

The essential OBE philosophy has been around a long time in trade schools, families, religions, the military, and any other effort in which what a student learns is crucial and required, not optional, for completion or certification. Writer and social critic George Bernard Shaw wrote, "What we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge, and not knowledge in pursuit of the child." That is the essence of outcome-based education.



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## Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation

The Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation was established on 13 October 1966 with the signing, by Dr. George H. Reavis, of the irrevocable trust agreement creating the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation Trust.

George H. Reavis (1883-1970) entered the education profession after graduating from Warrensburg Missouri State Teachers College in 1906 and the University of Missouri in 1911. He went on to earn an M.A. and a Ph.D. at Columbia University. Dr. Reavis served as assistant superintendent of schools in Maryland and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. In 1929 he was appointed director of instruction for the Ohio State Department of Education. But it was as assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Cincinnati public schools (1939-48) that he rose to national prominence.

Dr. Reavis' dream for the Educational Foundation was to make it possible for seasoned educators to write and publish the wisdom they had acquired over a lifetime of professional activity. He wanted educators and the general public to "better understand (1) the nature of the educative process and (2) the relation of education to human welfare."

The Phi Delta Kappa fastbacks were begun in 1972. These publications, along with monographs and books on a wide range of topics related to education, are the realization of that dream.



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